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Strengthening of the United Nations system

Human rights questions: implementation of human rights instruments

Letter dated 13 June 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit the report of an international meeting of experts on the theme of treaty body reform, held at Malbun, Liechtenstein, from 4 to 7 May 2003 (see annex). The meeting was organized jointly by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Government of Liechtenstein.

I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under items 60 and 119 (a) of the preliminary list.

(*Signed*) Christian **Wenaweser**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

* A/58/50/Rev.1 and Corr.1.

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Annex to the letter dated 13 June 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Report of a meeting on reform of the human rights treaty body system*

(Malbun, Liechtenstein, 4-7 May 2003)

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A. Introduction

3. A brainstorming meeting on reform of the human rights treaty bodies was organized jointly by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Government of Liechtenstein. The meeting took place in Malbun, Liechtenstein, from 4 to 7 May 2003. The meeting was attended by members of human rights treaty bodies, representatives of States, United Nations entities, the Inter-parliamentary Union, non-governmental organizations as well as one national institution.

4. The meeting was opened by the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr. Bertrand Ramcharan, who thanked the Government of Liechtenstein for generously hosting the brainstorming meeting and offered introductory remarks on the issue of treaty body reform.

5. The meeting was chaired by Ambassador Christian Wenaweser, Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein to the United Nations in New York.

6. The meeting agreed to work on the basis of the background note on treaty body reform prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for consultations on the issue of reforming the system of the human rights treaty bodies (HRI/ICM/2003/3), while not excluding other relevant issues not mentioned in the background note.

7. The meeting agreed to work in a brainstorming mode, in order to facilitate an open and informal discussion. It was agreed that participants should not speak in their respective official capacities and that statements made at the meeting would not be attributed.

8. The meeting held a general discussion on the background note which is reflected in the Chairman's summary, attached as an annex to this report, and thereafter focused on eight specific themes, building on the options put forward in the background note.

9. The meeting agreed that its report would be brought to the attention of the second inter-Committee Meeting which will take place in Geneva from 18 to 20 June 2003 and the fifteenth meeting of chairpersons of human rights treaty bodies which will meet in Geneva from 23 to 27 June 2003. It was also agreed that the report would be submitted to relevant intergovernmental bodies so as to be available to assist in the consideration of the Secretary-General's ideas on the reform of the treaty body system and the reactions to those ideas which are to be submitted by the end of September 2003.

10. The meeting agreed that briefings on the outcome of the brainstorming meeting should be convened both in Geneva and New York for States parties, United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders, including national human rights institutions.

11. The following report which was adopted by the meeting is organized in a three tier manner: "Points of agreement" indicate those ideas on which the meeting as a whole was able to agree. Under "other points", proposals are listed which were made and received varying degrees of support, short of general agreement. The column "comments" contains points of particular relevance to the proposals listed above.

B. Overarching points

12. Treaty body reform should focus on practical measures to advance the implementation of treaties and improving the effectiveness of monitoring, dialogue and follow-up.

13. Treaty body reform needs to be implemented flexibly, given the specific nature of each treaty and each treaty monitoring body. There is, however, also a need to improve the coordination, and to ensure coherence of the overall system.

14. Further work is needed in the area of definition and terminology, in particular with regard to concepts and terms used in the background note taking into account the agreements outlined in the following paragraphs.

15. Regular and increased resources should be made available to the OHCHR and the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) for the substantive and technical support of the work and activities of the human rights treaty bodies.

C. Harmonization of reporting guidelines

Points of agreement

16. The formulation of harmonized reporting guidelines to govern the technical and formal elements of the reports which would include expectations with regard to format, including length, formatting, modalities of submission as well as methodology for the preparation of reports would assist States parties in preparing their reports. The OHCHR should carry out an assessment of the practicability and effectiveness of the current guidelines relating to the reports of States parties and make recommendations in this regard to the inter-Committee Meeting in 2004.

17. Detailed revised draft guidelines for the core document should be prepared by the secretariat for the consideration of the inter-Committee and Chairpersons' Meetings.

Other points

18. The formulation of harmonized guidelines constituting three parts:

1. The recommendation in paragraph 17 above;

2. Guidelines relating to basic information each State party should submit in respect of each treaty which would include cross-cutting issues;

3. Guidelines specific to each treaty to which the State is a party.

19. An agreement on a single report would predicate the preparation of a single set of harmonized reporting guidelines.

D. A single report

Points of agreement

20. The notion of a single report summarizing a State party's implementation of the full range of human rights treaty provisions to which it is a party was rejected.

21. It is difficult for States parties to submit a single report satisfying their reporting obligations under all treaties to which they are a party, and separate reports relating to the implementation of each treaty to which the State is a party better enables States to fulfil their reporting obligations under each treaty to which they are a party.

22. If States parties nevertheless chose to submit a single document to satisfy their reporting obligations under all human rights treaties to which they are a party that document must be prepared in accordance with all of the reporting guidelines relating to the treaties to which they are a party.

Comments

23. Regardless of the desirability of a single report the concept of such a report is closely linked to the concept of a single treaty body.

24. A single report satisfying the reporting obligations of a State to each human rights treaty to which it is a party could be a long-term objective for the human rights treaty system to explore, without prejudice to the autonomy and effectiveness of individual treaty bodies, in particular as a cost- and resource-saving measure.

25. A single report requires amendments to existing treaties.

26. Other ways of conceptualizing a single report, other than those mentioned above, could be explored.

27. Arguments against a single report included:

- The marginalization of specific issues,
- Unmanageable length,
- Diminished overall utility of the report, including for civil society,
- Different periodicities,
- The burden of preparation on States parties,
- Burden and complexity of consideration by treaty bodies,
- Complexity and cost for the secretariat,
- Usefulness of specific reports for building national constituencies around particular issues and identifying lacunae in domestic legislation, policies and programmes,
- Requirement of amendment of treaties,
- A single report would inevitably result in a summary,
- A single report does not solve the issue of non-reporting.

28. Under certain circumstances, the submission of a single report might be the only option for some small States with limited administrative and resource capacity to comply with their reporting obligations.

E. Expanded core document

Points of agreement

29. The objective of the core document, which States parties are not legally obliged to submit separately, is to reduce the burden of reporting on States parties by avoiding repetition and overlap and to facilitate dialogue by allowing them to submit information relevant for all treaty bodies. However, States parties have not taken the optimum advantage of the possibility of submitting the core document and keeping it updated.

30. More detailed guidelines governing the core document requesting more specific information would result in a core document which would be more beneficial for all.

31. The secretariat should prepare a background paper including proposals for more detailed guidelines for submission to the inter-Committee Meeting.

Other points

32. A treaty body may only consider issues provided for in the specific provisions of treaties to which it is a party and core documents assist in this regard.

33. Revised guidelines for the core document could allow for the inclusion of information on the role of national human rights institutions, budgetary allocations in the area of human rights and basic statistical information and challenges confronting collection of information.

Comments

34. Many States parties are not aware of the possibility of submitting a core document.

35. Flexibility should govern the regularity with which the core document is updated.

36. Should a core document be expanded to include common or congruent obligations, the regularity of updating and the degree of analysis of such a report should be reviewed.

F. Focused periodic reports

Points of agreement

37. Focused reports are reports containing information on specific issues of their treaty obligations which may include those identified in dialogue between treaty bodies and individual States parties and concluding observations or comments.

38. The proposal of focused reports requires further exploration and definition.

Other points

39. States parties could be asked to submit focused reports after submitting their initial report, and at least one periodic report.

40. Treaty bodies should continue to request a comprehensive report when necessary or appropriate.

41. Focused reports may be linked to the notion of an expanded core document.

42. The notion and format of focused reports should be tested through a pilot project, preferably conducted by a long-standing treaty body, in order to identify possibilities and advantages of the use of such reports.

Comments

43. The following advantages of focused reports were identified:

- Framework for systematic follow-up to concluding observations or comments,
- Allow for shorter reports,
- Allow for more substantive and effective cross-referencing of reports,
- Reduce overall burden for States parties, treaty bodies and the secretariat,
- Improve quality of dialogue between States parties and treaty bodies,
- Allow for more in-depth analysis of issues and areas of concern,
- Provide framework for quality and focused concluding observations,
- More effective use of secretariat resources.

44. Concerns included:

- Focused reports might not comply with overall reporting obligations,
- Neglect of areas for periods of time,
- Allow for a non-comprehensive approach to reporting on treaty obligations, as well as selective implementation,
- Marginalization of some issues and related constituencies at national level,
- Such reports would not address non-reporting by States parties,
- Such reports might focus solely on issues receiving public attention,
- Narrowing of the basis of information for future reports,
- Focused reports might limit opportunities for States parties to highlight successes in implementation and best practices,
- Lack of clarity as to the basis of the focused report.

45. Treaty bodies could draw up lists of issues to guide the preparation of focused periodic reports.

46. States are already able to submit focused reports, and some have already submitted such reports.

47. Reporting guidelines and working methods innovations of some treaty bodies provide for the preparation of focused reports.

48. Disadvantages of the focused approach to reporting already exist in regard to the current reporting system which is currently overloaded and unable to maximize its potential.

49. The equal treatment of States parties to human rights treaties must be ensured in the consideration of the option of focused reports.

G. Thematic or modular reporting

Points of agreement

50. The concept of the thematic or the modular report requires further clarification.

Other points

51. A modular report is a report consisting of a common document for all treaty bodies to which specific reports under each treaty will be attached.

52. Thematic reports are distinct from modular reports, and focused reports are distinct from both thematic and modular reports.

Comments

53. Thematic reports are largely identical with focused reports; a report constructed along thematic lines taking into account areas common to a number of treaties may also be described as a thematic report.

54. Reports could be both focused and thematic.

H. Periodicity

Points of agreement

55. Treaty bodies should set their schedules for review of States parties reports as far ahead as possible.

Other points

56. Amendments to periodicity requirements in human rights treaties should not be recommended.

57. Treaty bodies should schedule the submission date of the next periodic report of States parties in their concluding observations or concluding comments.

58. Reporting under all human rights treaties should be subject to a five-year periodicity.

59. States should be provided with the opportunity of presenting reports to the various committees in a staggered time frame, while retaining the possibility of presenting reports to the committees in a short time frame if they so wish.

60. A mechanism, such as the inter-Committee Meeting, to oversee the overall schedule of presentation of reports to treaty bodies should be established.

61. The value of flexibility with respect to periodicity requirements must be considered against the value of equal treatment for all States.

62. Preparation of reports required under human rights treaties is a lengthy process at the national level.

Comments

63. Periodicity requirements in treaties can only be adjusted via amendments to the treaties.

64. The periodicity requirements in human rights treaties are directed to ensuring regular monitoring of all States parties on an equal basis.

65. Treaty bodies approach periodicity requirements with flexibility.

I. Capacity-building

Points of agreement

66. An inventory of capacity-building support available from entities of the United Nations system should be created.

67. Evaluation of impact of capacity-building efforts should be integrated into such efforts.

68 Best practices in approaches to capacity-building should be gathered and disseminated.

69. Capacity-building must be holistic and sustainable. It should be subject to quality control and aimed at implementation of treaty obligations and follow-up to recommendations of treaty bodies.

70. Capacity-building should also lead to a process of effective national reporting.

71. Existing capacity-building activities of the OHCHR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the DAW and the United Nations and non-United Nations actors are noted. These efforts, in particular relating to follow-up to recommendations of treaty bodies, should be expanded and adequately funded.

72. Enhanced coordination among capacity-building actors is strongly encouraged.

73. Efforts to improve coordination among the OHCHR and the DAW and treaty bodies should be undertaken in order to consider possible objective and strategies that could contribute to the effectiveness of technical cooperation.

74. All efforts should be made to ensure that capacity-building should be funded from, inter alia, the voluntary fund for technical cooperation of the OHCHR.

Other points

75. Mechanisms at the national level, such as reporting units or commissions, should be established and supported.

76. The issue of capacity-building should be considered in the broader framework of the Millennium Development Goals, as is already the case for some United Nations entities.

77. The capacity of the staff of the OHCHR, and the DAW and United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, including at the national level, such as United Nations country teams, to assist States with respect to the human rights treaty system should be strengthened.

78. Parliamentarians, parliamentary commissions and national human rights institutions should be familiarized further with the human rights treaty body system.

Comments

79. Capacity-building efforts, such as support for the establishment of a single unit for reporting, should not undermine the goal of mainstreaming of human rights at the national level and should include a broad human rights education strategy.

J. Miscellaneous

Points of agreement

80. The inter-Committee Meeting is an extremely valuable forum for exchange of views and coordination among treaty bodies.

81. Informal meetings between individual treaty bodies and States parties should be convened on a regular basis.

82. All treaty body members should be consulted about the Meetings of the Chairpersons and the inter-Committee Meeting.

Other points

83. Inter-Committee Meetings should increasingly replace the Meetings of Chairpersons.

84. A maximum of three terms for treaty body members with respect to individual treaty bodies could be considered.

85. The capacity of the secretariat to support treaty bodies should be strengthened.

86. The High Commissioner should issue a statement on the central value of the work of treaty bodies at the country level.

87. The issue of equitable geographical distribution and gender balance in the membership of treaty bodies should be addressed.

88. Press releases relating to treaty body sessions should be checked for accuracy by the relevant treaty bodies according to a procedure to be defined by each of these bodies.

89. Treaty bodies should develop a mechanism to ensure that concluding observations/comments are checked for factual accuracy.

90. Treaty bodies should introduce working methods innovations, such as time limits on interventions, to ensure best use of time available in sessions.

91. Treaty body experts should receive adequate honoraria, inter alia, to ensure their genuine independence.

92. Documentation for the consideration of treaty bodies should be submitted well in advance so as to allow for translation.

93. Lists of issues or questions should be drawn up by treaty bodies and submitted to States parties with regard to the dialogue on their reports.

94. As a short-term measure to address the problem of outstanding reports, treaty bodies should allow for the consolidation of overdue reports.

Comments

95. There should be no term limits for treaty body members.

Annex

Chairperson's summary

1. The following reflects the Chairperson's summary of the discussions during the plenary session of the brainstorming meeting on treaty body reform on 5 and 6 May 2003. The Chairperson takes personal responsibility for the summary which was not adopted by the meeting.

2. The summary is limited to those plenary discussions which dealt with a general consideration of the background note prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights which was agreed as providing the basis for the considerations of the meeting. Consequently, those plenary meetings dealing with the reports from sub-groups on specific topics are not reflected in this summary. The contents and outcomes of those discussions are part of the report which was adopted by the meeting. Upon suggestion from the Chair, the discussions during these meetings focused primarily on the issue of a "single or consolidated report" and a "focused report", contained in the list of possible reform measures contained in the background note.

3. In his opening address, Mr. Bertie Ramcharan, the Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted that the Secretary-General's ideas on reform of the treaty body system put forward in his report on strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change were echoed in the Office of Internal Oversight Services' (OIOS) "Management review of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights". He also noted that the quest for reform in this context was a continuing process and required the input of members of treaty bodies, States parties and civil society so that a practical outcome could be achieved.

4. The Deputy High Commissioner suggested that a study of the consolidated obligations created by the human rights framework, including as explained by general comments or recommendations of the human rights treaty bodies, could provide States parties with a full picture of the totality of their legal obligations, and allow for a holistic approach to implementation. The objectives of the human rights treaty system, as well as the treaty bodies, in securing implementation of obligations should be the context of proposals for reform in this area. Emphasis should also be placed on ways in which the system can contribute to the national protection system of each country, as well as the system of international protection.

5. Participants underlined that the current human rights treaty system had significant strengths. It allowed for the consideration of implementation of human rights obligations at the domestic level and provided a means by which human rights concerns could be integrated into national development strategies. The current system also provided a context for the creation of communities concerned with specific human rights concerns. Emphasis was placed on the importance of a practical and flexible approach, and it was noted that the working methods of treaty bodies had developed in accordance with the spirit, rather than the letter, of the individual treaties. While reform efforts were to be welcomed, it was also worth drawing attention to the significantly increased number of ratifications since the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. Some of the difficulties the treaty bodies were facing were thus the result of the success of the reporting system.

6. A number of participants were concerned that a consolidating approach to the obligations under human rights treaties could result in invisibility of certain categories of rights or rights holders. All participants rejected the proposal that each State be allowed to produce a single report summarizing its implementation of the full range of the provisions of the human rights treaties to which it is a party as proposed by the Secretary-General, on the basis that such a report would lack focus and transparency. It was also questioned whether a single report was feasible in practice and if such an approach would in fact ease the burden of reporting currently imposed on States parties.

7. However, several participants expressed the view that there was no legal obstacle to States parties preparing and submitting a single report provided that such a report was prepared in accordance with the reporting guidelines of the treaty bodies of the human rights treaties to which a State was a party. It was suggested that such an approach might be the only option for small States to comply with their reporting obligations, especially for small States with very limited administrative and human resources. Some participants suggested that amendment of the treaties would be required before such a report would be acceptable, as each treaty envisaged reporting on a discrete basis. Most were of the opinion that such a report would marginalize certain issues, and detract from the different focus that reports to the various treaty bodies should have.

8. A number of participants noted that the idea of the single report was associated with and would inevitably lead to the creation of a single committee or treaty body. The preparation of such a report might also impose a significant burden for those States parties which wished to report in detail on their obligations. States with federal structures could also face significant obstacles. Furthermore, the single report might also be burdensome for the treaty bodies and the secretariat. A single report would not necessarily increase the level of State party compliance with reporting obligations, and the effort required to update a single report for each treaty body would outweigh any advantages of a single report. It was also suggested that civil society would not regard a single report as an adequate monitoring mechanism, and that its length and complexity might make it inaccessible for that audience.

9. A single report complying with all the reporting guidelines of all the treaty bodies would comply with the legal requirements in the human rights treaties. Such a report might also be a very comprehensive report, addressing areas of overlap or congruence in the human rights treaties through cross-referencing. Such a report complying with the reporting guidelines of all the treaty bodies could be a long-term objective, and result in significant savings of resources. The formulation of comprehensive consolidated guidelines would be required, and safeguards would be required to ensure that the report did not merely summarize implementation. Greater clarity and more consideration of the requirements of the comprehensive single report were necessary, as well as support for States parties.

10. The value of the preparation and presentation of reports as a process was emphasized, with several participants pointing to the fact that the reporting process served to raise awareness of human rights issues generally, as well as those specific to individual treaties. Several participants stressed the importance of making reporting an effective instrument to instigate change at the national level, and that reporting should be viewed as a continuous and periodic process, rather than a one-time event. In this regard, follow-up to the concluding observations/comments of

treaty bodies was essential. Several participants noted that the practice of engaging international consultants to prepare human rights reports might detract from the necessary State engagement in reporting as an instrument to ensure progress in implementation. It was noted that it was the Government's responsibility to prepare human rights reports and that while non-governmental organizations and others should be involved in the process, they should not take the lead in the preparation of reports.

11. It was important that reasons for non-reporting were identified. These could be political, but very often were linked to lack of human and financial resources and capacity. In some cases, non-reporting could result from a perception that the process of reporting was confrontational, perhaps in the nature of a judicial proceeding. Some participants suggested that individual treaty bodies could meet with non-reporting States parties in order to discuss obstacles to reporting, and to make proposals and suggestions in that regard. A few participants also suggested that States parties should react to non-reporting by other States parties, and that the meetings of States parties to the individual treaties should discuss non-reporting. This would be a logical consequence of the fact that reporting to the treaty bodies was a legal obligation which States had to fulfil vis-à-vis other States parties, rather than vis-à-vis the treaty bodies themselves. The practice of most treaty bodies of reviewing States parties whose reports were significantly overdue in the absence of a report was commended by some participants, while others considered this practice to be ultra vires the terms of the treaties.

12. Capacity-building efforts undertaken by the OHCHR, other parts of the secretariat, including DAW, and other United Nations entities, such as UNICEF were welcomed. Participants called for the strengthening of capacity-building activities, both for States and civil society, and the optimization of resources available to the OHCHR and the wider United Nations system for this purpose. It was noted that members of parliaments and parliamentary commissions should be further familiarized with the human rights treaty body system particularly in view of the authority of parliament to hold governments accountable.

13. Emphasis was placed on the need for capacity-building activities to be subject to quality control and to be sustained, rather than one-off training events for bureaucrats, and on the importance of follow-up to such activities. Capacity-building could also be directed at assisting States parties to create structures and frameworks, such as units, to coordinate report preparation. Strategies to ensure that the human rights treaty system formed part of human rights education were also required. Coordination and cooperation across the United Nations system, including through United Nations Country Teams, in this area was critical, as was evaluation of impact. Efforts should also be directed at building relationships of confidence with individual States parties.

14. Several participants suggested that an inventory of capacity-building and training activities in the field of human rights available through the United Nations should be compiled by the OHCHR, and made available through an electronic database. In addition, a compilation of best practices and success stories in capacity-building, as well as the impact of the human rights treaty system at the national level should be prepared. Treaty bodies should be encouraged to identify areas where capacity-building would be of benefit for individual States parties. Linkages should also be made with other processes, such as the CCA/UNDAF and the PRSPs.

15. It was suggested that the strain the current system places on States parties, the secretariat and States had to be taken into account. Participants therefore suggested that States should take advantage of the possibility of preparing a core document containing information relevant for all treaty bodies in accordance with the existing guidelines agreed by them in 1991. It was noted that there was no legal obligation for States parties to submit a core document, and a significant number had not done so. Of those States that had submitted such documents, few had kept these up to date. Although some participants suggested that the core document was only background for treaty bodies and could not form the basis of dialogue with States parties, a large number of participants agreed that, given the nature of the information contained in a core document, such core documents could be part of a dialogue between treaty bodies and Member States.

16. A number of participants suggested that there was scope for the formulation by treaty bodies of guidelines which would provide for an expanded core document including substantive areas common to each treaty, as well as statistical information, including difficulties in the collection of such information. Any expanded core document would require regular updating and some participants were concerned if it were required to contain too much common information it would rapidly become outdated.

17. Several participants noted that States parties' reports were frequently general and did not provide sufficient specific information on the level of implementation of treaty obligations. It was noted that treaty bodies could call for more focused information or focused reports. Several participants drew attention to the current practice, whereby all but one treaty body prepares a list of issues and questions to guide the dialogue with the State party on its report, and suggested that a similar list of issues prepared by the relevant treaty body could guide the preparation of a focused report, while also leaving the State party free to provide further information. Several participants suggested that the State party's previous report, concluding observations, any other information the State party might wish to provide, and NGO reports could form the basis of this list of issues. Others considered that lists of issues could not form the basis of reports of States parties as this was not envisaged in the treaties and because of the difficulties treaty bodies would have in accessing appropriate information on which to base the list of issues.

18. Several participants pointed to the emerging practice of treaty bodies, particularly the Human Rights Committee, to require reporting on issues highlighted in the concluding observations. Several also drew attention to the potential linkage between an expanded core document and focused periodic reports based on concluding observations which highlight priority concerns. Although a few participants considered that concluding observations should not identify priority concerns, others indicated that guidance from treaty bodies with regard to future reports was valuable, and led to sustained dialogue between the State party and the individual treaty body. It was also pointed out that the practice of preparing "focused reports" was already an option for States that decided to concentrate their periodic reporting on areas previously identified by treaty bodies.

19. Participants emphasized the importance of a consistent approach to all States parties, which also allowed each treaty body the flexibility of adopting its own approach. Some suggested that States parties should be called on to submit up to two comprehensive reports and then be given the option of preparing a focused periodic

report. Comprehensive reports could then be submitted after the consideration of two focused periodic reports, or whenever a treaty body requested such a report. Some participants suggested that the option of focused reports would require strengthening of the analytical capacity of treaty bodies and the secretariat and proposed that one treaty body implement the approach of focused reports on a pilot basis. The concern was expressed that focused reports would make it more difficult for treaty bodies to have an overall picture of the implementation of a specific human rights treaty by a State party.

20. Attention was drawn to the periodicity which reports under human rights treaties are required to comply and that these periodicity requirements differed from treaty to treaty. While emphasizing the importance of regular periodic review of implementation of human rights obligations, most participants suggested that efforts should be made to harmonize these requirements, although some suggested that this would require amendments to the treaties. The importance of equal treatment of States parties was also stressed, although allowing treaty bodies flexibility with respect to reporting periodicity was also recommended. More harmonization of the methods of work of treaty bodies was also recommended, so that an holistic message concerning human rights implementation would be conveyed to States parties.

21. Several participants recommended the creation of a mechanism which would enable States parties to stagger the submission and presentation before treaty bodies should they wish to do so. In this context, some participants suggested that the role of treaty bodies in monitoring implementation of obligations could be more effective if reports were submitted and considered over a period of years. Others believed that the preparation and consideration of reports should not be staggered, but that report preparation, which was a two-year process at the national level should be an ongoing process in order to provide a framework of effective human rights policies at the country level. It was also noted that some States parties wish to present their reports under all the human rights treaties to which they are a party in a short time frame.

22. Several participants drew attention to the difference in detail and length of the current guidelines prepared by treaty bodies. The necessity of review of the current reporting guidelines of human rights treaty bodies was also pointed out in this context. Such a review should consider the most effective form of guidelines and the possibility of their harmonization, in particular with respect to formal matters, such as format, presentation and length, and the methodology for preparing reports. In this regard, some drew attention to the introduction of page limitations for reports by some treaty bodies and suggested that all treaty bodies adopt this approach. Some participants suggested that the general comments or recommendations be integrated into revised reporting guidelines. Others noted that general comments or recommendations were not legally binding.

23. A number of participants highlighted the potential of the inter-Committee Meeting as a coordinating body for issues concerning all treaty bodies. It was noted that the inter-Committee Meeting could coordinate dates of presentation of States parties reports, and take the lead in the revision of the reporting guidelines of all Committees. It could also have a substantive function, in particular in the formulation of comments or recommendations on cross-cutting thematic concerns.